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Interreligious dialogue in schools: Beyond asymmetry and categorisation?

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Abstract

Interreligious dialogue is a central objective in European and UNESCO policy and research documents, in which educational institutions are seen as central places for dialogue. In this article we discuss this type of dialogue under the conditions of asymmetry and categorisation in two Finnish schools. Finnish education has often been lauded for its successful implementation of equity and equality by the thousands of “pedagogical tourists” who visit the country’s schools to witness the so-called ‘miracle of Finnish education’. Through theoretically informed reading of ethnographic data we examine how Self and Other are constructed in everyday encounters in school and how religions, religious groups and individuals become regarded as Others. We also ask whether the aims of interreligious dialogue in schools represent a viable way to learn about each other and to increase mutual understanding. The theoretical and methodological approaches derive from postcolonial, poststructural and related feminist theories as well as from recent research on intercultural education and communication.

Uskontojenvälistä dialogia pidetään keskeisenä tavoitteena monissa eurooppalaisissa ja UNESCO:n poliittisissa dokumenteissa ja tutkimusasiakirjoissa, joissa koulutusinstituutit esitetään näissä usein keskeisiksi dialogin paikoiksi. Artikkelissamme tarkastelemme arjen kohtaamisiin liittyvää uskontodialogia sekä kohtaamisissa läsnä olevaa epäsymmetriaa ja kategorisointia kahdessa suomalaisessa koulussa. Suomalaisten koulutusjärjestelmän yhdenvertaisuutta ja tasa-arvoisuutta ovat kehuneet ne tuhannet ”koulutusturistit”, jotka ovat vierailleet Suomen kouluissa tutustumassa suomalaisen koulutuksen menestystarinaa. Tarkastelemme etnografista aineistoamme teoriasta ammentavan etnografisen luennan avulla analysoiden sitä, kuinka itse ja toinen rakentuvat koulun arjen kohtaamisissa ja kuinka uskontoja, uskonnollisia ryhmiä ja yksilöitä pidetään toisina. Pohdimme, pystyykö kouluihin sijoittuva uskontodialogi edistämään tavoitteidensa mukaisesti keskinäistä oppimista ja lisäämään keskinäistä ymmärtämistä. Artikkelimme teoreettiset ja metodologiset näkökulmat perustuvat jälkikoloniaalisiin ja jälkistrukturalistisiin feministisiin teoretisointeihin sekä viimeaikaiseen interkulttuurisen kasvatuksen ja vuorovaikutuksen tutkimukseen.

Le dialogue interreligieux représente l’un des objectifs central dans la plupart des directives et rapports des institutions européennes et de l’UNESCO. Dans ces documents, l’école est présentée comme étant l’un des clés du dialogue. Les auteurs de cet article problématisent le dialogue interreligieux à travers les obstacles à ce dialogue que représentent l’asymétrie et de la catégorisation. Le contexte est celui de la Finlande. L’éducation finlandaise a souvent été louée pour son équité et égalité, notamment par les milliers de « touristes pédagogiques » qui visitent le pays chaque année pour rendre compte du ‘miracle de l’éducation finlandaise’. À partir d’une lecture critique de données ethnographiques, les auteurs examinent comment soi et l’autre sont construits à l’école et comment les religions, les groupes religieux et les individus sont altérisés. Les auteurs portent également des regards critiques sur les objectifs du dialogue interreligieux : conduisent-ils à apprendre à se connaître les uns les autres et à une

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compréhension mutuelle ? L'article se base sur des approches théoriques et méthodologiques issues des théories postcoloniales, poststructuralistes et féministes mais également des recherches récentes en éducation et communication interculturelles.

Keywords

Interreligious dialogue, interculturality, Finnish education, Otherness, understanding

Introduction

Interreligious dialogue together with intercultural dialogue is a central objective of European and UNESCO educational and policy documents (Council of Europe 2005, 2007, 2008, 2011; UNESCO 2006; Jackson 2009; Rec. 12; Rec 1920; Rec 1804). While researchers of religious education have written extensively about the links between intercultural and interreligious education (see e.g. Jackson 2004a; Jackson, Miedema, Weiße & Williams 2007) the fields of multicultural/intercultural education/communication have been hesitant to tackle the theme (exceptions: Riitaola, Poulter & Kuusisto 2010; Wolf 2012). Both in policy and scholarly texts educational institutions are considered to be central places for such dialogue. The main goal is to foster a sense of equal togetherness and discussions between people or groups representing "different" faiths, religions and even "cultures". The overarching goals consist in learning about diversity and increasing mutual understanding, respect and tolerance but also social cohesion and the integration of religious minorities into the society (see Jackson 2004a). The controversial notion of citizenship is also often used in that regard.

In this article we discuss the conditions of and the possibilities for interreligious dialogue in a school context, taking Finland as an illustration. Finland, a country 'new' to mass immigration represents an interesting case, especially as the Finnish system of education has been the centre of world attention due to its excellent results in the OECD PISA studies. Our interest lays in how self and the other are constructed in everyday encounters in schools (Dervin, 2012). What modes of identification are available for different groups of students and staff in the school space? What and who seems to enable and disable the 'possibilities of becoming' (Butler 1993, p. 10; Youdell 2003), that is to say the possibilities to identify in a way one hopes to be identified, seen and heard as a subject and not as an object in interreligious encounters? Finally, we also examine how the ideas of 'religions,' religious groups and persons are constructed through discourses and practices of schooling.

Based on theoretically informed reading of our ethnographic data, we suggest that some students and staff members are Otherised in the interreligious encounters in schools. We also argue that the conditions of dialogue are different for those who are constructed as Others. Finally, such Othering,

that is related to unproblematised notions about religion and dialogue, work against the aims of togetherness and mutual learning of interreligious dialogue.

Background & theoretical and methodological considerations

This paper derives from the observations that discussion on religion and interreligious dialogue in intercultural/multicultural education studies has been mainly lacking or it has been problem-centred: the presence of religion is considered as problematic in the school space and as a potential risk for the coherence of societies (as an example see Coulby & Zambeta 2008; see critique in Salili & Hoosain 2006; Modood 2007; Riitaoja, Poulter & Kuusisto 2010). Although intercultural studies have discussed Othering and prejudices related to religious minorities (especially Muslims) in European societies and schools (Dhamoon, 2009), there has been less discussion on how the notions of religion and religion as a social category may contribute to the process of Othering. Religion as a social category has, therefore, been lacking theoretical and methodological analyses. In intercultural education studies interreligious dialogue, and its related terms—mutual learning and respect—have been offered as solutions for such asymmetry (e.g. Jackson 2004b). Along with European policy documents, some intercultural education studies have also considered interreligious and intercultural dialogue as a tool of integration for minorities in society (Arthur 2011; Hodgson 2011). We argue that the conditions under which the assumedly equal dialogue takes place, and the positions of the self and the other (asymmetrically) constructed in such encounters, are not sufficiently problematised. Moreover, discussions on how the problem-oriented aim of integrating religious minorities may contribute to Othering and how integration may work as a tool for domesticating the Other are lacking (exceptions: Hoskins & Sallah 2011; Riikonen & Dervin 2012).

Our theoretical approach derives from postcolonial philosophy that problematises the concept of religion (e.g. Nandy 2002; King 2009; Mignolo 2009), from poststructural feminist studies that analyse the discursive construction of the Self and social categories (e.g. Butler 1993; Youdell 2003), and from postcolonial and feminist studies that analyse the construction of the privileged subject and the subaltern Other through knowledge, discourses and social and institutional practices (e.g. Spivak 2004; Andreotti, Ahenakew & Cooper 2012; Ahmed 2012). We combine these theoretical approaches with recent research on intercultural education and communication aiming to deconstruct the solid and fixed notions of culture and identity (see Dervin 2010, 2011; Holliday 2011; Gillespie, Howarth & Cornish 2012). We intentionally discuss interreligious dialogue in relation to interculturality. Although these notions are not the same, they are very much related. For example, problems related

to the solid and static social category of “culture” (often considered as national culture) but also gender or social class (Holliday 2011; Gillespie et al. 2012) are also applicable to the discussions of religion and cannot be separated.

Along with postcolonial and poststructural feminist school ethnographies, the focus is on social positions and spaces that are constructed through institutional and social practices (Gordon, Holland & Lahelma 2000; Lappalainen 2006). As such we are not analysing the experiences of Othering of the other (although such experiences are also expressed in our interview data). We are analysing how asymmetries, categorisations and otherness are constructed in relation to knowledge, language, social actions and material-physical distinctions (Riitaoja 2013). In this kind of ethnographic research the positions and subjectivities of the researcher and the researched are understood as contextual and intersubjectively constructed (Dervin & Risager 2014).

The research data come from an ethnographic study on the construction of Otherness in schools (Riitaoja 2013). The data were collected in two primary schools (with children aged 7 to 13) in Helsinki in 2008 and 2009 (Riitaoja, 2013). One of the schools is considered more “diverse” in terms of race, religion and social class than the other (white, middle class, Lutheran-oriented) school. The data consist of interviews of the school staff (n=27, interviewed individually, in small groups, or both) as well as field notes about lessons and other school activities. For this article we have selected excerpts that best illustrate the idea of interreligious dialogue in the schools under scrutiny. The original language of the excerpts is Finnish and they were translated in English for this article.

Othering the Other in interreligious encounters

Who wears the trousers?

We start by analysing the othering of the Other in interreligious encounters. In the schools under scrutiny white secular Lutheranism constituted the unproblematised, and therefore, the “invisible” norm of schooling (Riitaoja 2013). In this context certain bodily characters represent “difference” and they become the marks of religiosity, resulting in othering. The data reveal that this process of othering can apply to both students and staff members. In this process the intersection of religion, race, nationality and gender is an essential tool for analysing what is happening:

It's recess, I am in the teachers' room. A young Somali-born girl enters the room. Her clothes are wet because of playing outside. Her teacher goes to another room to find dry clothes for her. At the same time two other staff members are talking to the girl.

Staff member 2: Can you use trousers?

Girl: No.

(Staff members 2 and 3 are watching each other for a moment in a specific way).

Staff member 3: Well, should you go home, how long is your school day today?

Girl: Until 12.

Staff member 2: Well, you will survive then as you are.

(Fieldnotes, February 27th 2008)²

The exchange of glances between the two staff members is interesting as it seems to connote potential frustration or/and compassion towards the girl. The girl's religion and "culture" (Somali) seem to be seen to prevent her from acting in a "reasonable" way, in other words to change into dry clothes. In this situation the normative "right" and "reasonable" way of acting would be to dress "according to the given situation", where "practical clothing" and dry clothes would be prioritised over other principles.

The trousers are an insignificant side issue but at the same time a meaningful symbol representing equality. They are also used in a way to categorise people. On the one hand, trousers are ordinary pieces of clothing. The "Finnish" gendered way of dressing and the notion of "situation-specific dressing" become normal and unproblematised. Implicitly, the girl's refusal to wear trousers seems to be read as an over-reaction: it becomes an insurmountable issue for the girl who is seen as a victim of the gendered practices of her religion and culture. On the other hand, the act of wearing trousers significantly symbolises equality between men and women. It symbolises the fact that a woman is free and equal; she is—in the context of Finnish gender and related equality debates—*like a man* in a sense.

From the staff members' perspective it could be perceived that the problem is not the lack of proper extra clothes but the gendered, religion- or culture-related clothing of the girl that represents a sign of inequality. One could ask what if the child with wet clothes had been a white Finnish boy and the only extra piece of clothing available had been a skirt? Would the staff have offered him a skirt or would they have felt sorry for not having 'proper' clothes for the boy? And, if the boy had refused the skirt, would he have been considered as a victim of the gendered practices of his "Finnish" culture

² Translated from Finnish

and religion? Women are expected to become man-like, which would prove their equality. Such logic does not seem to work in reverse.

The notion of equality is closely linked to the idea of free will and choice. A white European liberal secular educated male person is considered to be free and independent (Spivak 1999). A subject making choices is considered as a free subject. Only certain types of choices, however, are seen as “right” choices that “prove” the freedom of the individual. A “wrong” choice, like refusing to wear trousers, indicates that there is no freedom of choice or that this choice is not an autonomous act. (Laws & Davies 2000; Youdell 2003.)

From the ‘real’ other to the ‘same-other’

The superiority of the so-called secular subject is also evident in the following excerpt taken from the interview of a white Finnish-born teacher who converted to Islam and wears a veil. Finnishness and Muslim identity are in tension with each other:

Interviewer (relates to a wider discussion on the experiences of being different): Well, are there moments or situations that have caused you to think about life differently?

“Sara” [teacher]: Well, I think that changing my religion and... what it means is surprising. When you become part of a minority, a Muslim in Finland, you find out that while legally you can practice any religion, according to the law, in practice Finnish culture is not very tolerant.

Interviewer: In what kind of situations do you see this?

Sara: Mm, what I said before, indirect discrimination, there is not so much direct discrimination... sometimes of course... (...) when somebody... talks to me like I was inferior to them there is an assumption that you cannot be reasonable or grown up, no matter how old you are, if you are a Muslim. You feel you are like someone to be watched after. I think they would never talk to me in this way if I did not wear a veil, because they would not see that I am a Muslim without the veil.

Interviewer: Is there any difference between the two, being an immigrant and a native Muslim?

Sara: Yes, mm, there are prejudices really towards, especially towards Somali people, because of their ethnic background. But, on the other hand, when they come from elsewhere it is more easily accepted that you are a Muslim compared to if a Finn is a Muslim. Ok, there are also situations that being a Muslim is an advantage, that people [the non-Muslim majority] will listen to you much better for certain issues, what I say about religion as a Finnish Muslim. For example, let’s take a simple example that circumcision does not belong to Islam. And sometimes you can build bridges but occasionally it is the most terrible thing that there can be, not from my perspective but meaning how the people around me are thinking about me. So, in such situations you do feel different. (“Sara”, Islamic studies in 2009)

Here the teacher describes how her position as a reasonable, grown-up person, who used to be part of the white Finnish majority (the ‘same’), was altered due to her conversion (same-other). As such she became a ‘same’ who is an ‘other’, in other words, a ‘same-other’. Her veil becomes a bodily mark that signals her being a Muslim and thus a ‘subordinate Other’ potentially oppressed by her religion.

This is because wearing a veil is not always perceived as a sign of free choice in Finland and in many other ‘Western’ countries (see Bilge 2010; also Yang 2009). Her conversion to Islam is seen as an unreasonable and deplorable choice that also “shows” her to be, as she describes, an unreasonable person (an unreasonable ‘same’ who turns into a same-other). Due to wearing of the veil she is not seen to belong to the group of autonomous, reasonable, wise and rational adults anymore (the ‘same’). This could be related to the idea that identities and positions are not stable but continuously reconstructed through repetitive ‘right’ actions (see Butler 1993; Youdell 2003) [footnote 1]. Here some choices are seen as ‘free’ and ‘reasonable’ choices that reconstruct the identity of a person as an autonomous and a reasonable subject while some actions become ‘wrong’ choices indicating the lack of reason and choice and therefore the lack of autonomy and reason of that person. The status of same-other that she describes in the excerpt seems to derive from the latter. According to Mignolo (2009), on the continuum of the temporal development of people, nations and ideas, the liberal secular individual represents “progress” while Muslims represent temporal “backwardness”:

In “modern space,” epistemology was first Christian and the White. In “enchanted places”, ”wisdom” (and *not* epistemology) was, to begin with, non-Christian (one of the reasons why Christianity remained complicit with secular philosophical critics) and also, later on, “colored”. Islam, for instance, became a colored religion. Christianity, particularly Protestant Christianity, became whiter after the reformation. (...) (Mignolo 2009, p. 278.)

The position of the veiled Finnish teacher as a white European Muslim, a ‘same-other’ is, however, different from the position of the ‘real’ Other. This is seen in the opportunity of the teacher to speak on behalf of the ‘real’ Other (e.g. in the case of circumcision). Her whiteness and Finnishness offers her the position to speak and to be heard among the white secular Lutheran Finns. The ‘real’ Other, instead, is often thought of as profoundly “lacking” the virtues of the liberal secular individual. This Other is yet an Otherised Other seen to be without free will and freedom of choice. Because of such an Otherising lens her actions are not considered as choices or “proofs” of autonomy. Instead they are seen to be the result of “socialization” caused by her “cultural” or religious background: she was born in an “inferior” religion or “culture”. The ‘real’ Other is not considered to have the capacity to distance herself from her traditions nor to take an “objective” position. In popular doxa she is not expected to make reasonable choices. It is thus more “excusable” for her to be a Muslim than for a white Finn who is considered as capable to make reasonable choices.

In the following section we examine how the construction of the ‘subaltern’ Other prescribes the positions the Other has at her disposal in interreligious negotiations in the school context.

“Negotiating” with the Other in a school context

The everyday life in a school with students from different religious backgrounds requires accepting “exceptions” to the general rules but also structural changes to the secular Lutheran school culture typical of Finnish institutions. In our data, school staff told how they aimed to take “different” cultures and religions into account in the everyday life of a school. Structural changes such as changes in the traditions, routines and rules of schooling as well as changes in the contents and practices of teaching were, however, more difficult to execute than individual exceptions to these orders (Riitaoja 2013.) We consider these situations to be “negotiations” with the Other. Such situations were considered by staff members to include a risk of renunciation of the “Finnish” traditions in favour of the Other’s. Because such acts of tolerance and flexibility were not always desirable, the precondition of the negotiation was that, along with the suggested structural changes to Finnish practices and traditions, the Other would also give up some of her traditions. This appears clearly in a teacher’s comments in the following excerpt:

Yes, I think that we can’t think of this as a one-way process that we have to be flexible but then... I think this is both a challenge and an opportunity that we learn to live together respecting each other. And this is why, it’s not just from our side but it depends on all the oth[ers], different cultures too. And one needs to make some kind of compromise. But what is not a solution is a kind of flexibility that the Finnish school- or cult[ure], that we start to change our habits a lot, but it depends also on everybody else to [move on] in such a direction. So we will go towards them but they should come towards us and then we will find each other... (“Lisa” in 2009)

What is considered as flexible and negotiable in general appears to be defined by the ‘locals’, i.e. Finns in our context (see also Lappalainen 2006). Here the preconditions, options and positions of the negotiators seem to be already prescribed and evaluated and the seats for negotiators already arranged in the negotiation room. The Other who is seated at the negotiation table is, however, the *representation* of an Other constructed by the school actors. The figure of the Other is their own reflection and the voice of the Other is the echo of their voice. The subaltern Other cannot speak because the only voice heard is the echo of the subject’s own voice (Spivak 1988). She can “speak” and make her “choice” only within the logic and under the conditions predetermined by the ‘locals’. If the Other chooses “right” she will have a temporary position as a reasonable and flexible subject. Denial or “wrong” choice can be interpreted as unwillingness to be flexible.

In the following section we discuss how the unproblematised norms of the educational space and the uneven/asymmetric positions between the secular Lutheran subject and the subaltern/Otherised Other influence the possibilities and conditions of interreligious dialogue.

Power relations in interreligious dialogue and in the educational space

In scholarly discussions on religious education the space of dialogue is often considered as neutral and equal for all participants (see Riitaoja et al. 2010). Besides, the people participating in interreligious dialogue are often considered as pre-existing essentialist entities and not intersubjectively and discursively constructed (Dervin 2010). The space of dialogue is not a fixed room where dialogue is going to take place. Instead, the space and the subjects are socially constructed in relation to each other: we construct the space but it also constructs us as subjects (e.g. Massey 2005). It also constructs meanings and power relations related to our bodily characters (Young 2005). The following excerpt reflects the interrelation of the researcher and the researched, but also, it shows how the space of dialogue in a lesson of Islamic studies changes along with the bodies and related power relations present in the classroom:

It is a lesson in Islamic studies (pupils' age: 7–8). The teacher is going through the most important things in the curriculum, right before the exam.

Teacher: What does Islam mean? What does Muslim mean? If your Finnish friend, a Christian, asks this from you, what would you say?

The teacher writes on the board: "Islam is a religion".

Teacher: A Muslim believes in Allah. And then, who is our prophet?

(...)

After the lesson the teacher comes to me and asks: "Are you a Christian? I am sorry, please do not feel offended. The law of Islam is very strict sometimes." (Fieldnotes, March 7th 2008)

The presence of one of us in the class changes something: from the minority's point of view it is not a lesson "among us" anymore. The teacher, a non-European immigrant and Muslim herself, has to take into consideration the white, European and presumably Christian researcher in her classroom and possibly adapt her teaching accordingly.

Postcolonial and feminist researchers have paid attention to the altered positions of the Other in the spaces dominated by hegemonic groups. In New Zealand, Jones (1999) analyses the limits of cross-cultural dialogue by making visible how e.g. Maori students preferred to study among themselves

and without white Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent) students, and to be able to talk about their issues without being dominated by the Pākehā framework. For Pākehās the separated lessons meant a missed opportunity for learning about the other and to access their knowledge. Fraser (1995) talks about the relevance of alternative spaces for sexual minorities. Ahmed (2012) examines the meaning of queer and black spaces outside of straight and white spaces. All of these scholars point out that the presence of representatives of the hegemonic group excludes other voices and ways of being. In this sense the common space, togetherness and dialogue can actually be harmful for those who are constructed as Others. Furthermore dialogue may not offer any mutual opportunities to learn because it does not offer extra knowledge for the Others about the hegemonic group: in order to survive in the unfamiliar spaces the Others have yet to learn the “culture” of that group. The Others only become the objects or tools of learning for the hegemonic group in order for them [the Others] to be heard in their [the hegemonic groups’] terms and understood through their framework. In this way interreligious dialogue does not increase equality, respect, and mutual understanding. Instead, it becomes a tool of dominating and domesticating the Other.

Pause: Are religious staff and students the Other par excellence?

In the dichotomy religion / secularism, religion is often considered monolithic with authoritative ideology essentially controlling individuals, while secularism, a state “without religion”, is considered to be neutral and equal, offering freedom for people. The following excerpt with a Finnish teacher illustrates this logic:

One thing I’ve recently realised is that all religions, ideologies, fundamentalisms, if we take them literally... they may lead to terrible things. When we interpret the Old Testament there are really awful events there and probably we would find out, I am not sure, from the New Testament too. We don’t realise the basic connections among people because we focus on differences. These differences are, after all, related to different interpretations. Obviously there are different interpretations in different parts of the world. But I don’t know whether people will ever be able to [find a connection], because religion and culture are used as tools of power... it’s possible that a person is good even if s/he had killed someone. I don’t know if this means we must take our distance or that one must look from the outside inwards. (teacher “Lisa” in 2009)

In this excerpt religious people are constructed as victims with limited opportunities to think and act independently. Opposed to this victimised Other is the free and independent, enlightened secular or secular Christian subject who is able to “step outside” of his own framework and to think objectively.

Adopting such an “objective” standpoint means to become an autonomous subject and to break away from the authoritarian power (Hoskins & Sallah 2011; Andreotti et al. 2012)

In the context of schooling one of the main goals is to help students to become autonomous. According to Popkewitz (2001, p. 180) “the object of pedagogical reflection and action in modernity is an individuality that is systematically calculated and rationalized in the name of freedom”. The values and beliefs that direct the Other are considered as restrictive:

I’ve also had a student from a very strict Pentecostal family, and there were very strict orders [by the family] that s/he cannot do this or that. Then you just tried, you had to accept that there are things that you could not do within the curriculum. (“Karen”, 2009)

The normalising discourses and practices of schooling are often considered as emancipatory. Yet the fact that one disregards that such discourses and practices are related to power differentials is problematic (Popkewitz 2001).

Religions at school: Explaining categories or the categories as explanations?

The necessity to problematize categories in interreligious dialogue

In the previous sections, we have seen how the religious other is othered in the Finnish school contexts where we collected data. We saw that both students and staff members can be othered depending on what they represent through certain bodily markers (veil, skirt instead of trousers) amongst others. In this section we explore the role of teachers in interreligious dialogue. School leadership and teachers play an important (powerful) role in creating discourses and practices in schools. We start with an excerpt from ethnographic field notes:

...It was very interesting when we studied and discussed practices of Islam in the lessons. The [Muslim] students mentioned how funerals and weddings are celebrated. The teacher whispered to me: “It is a surprise how diverse the traditions are because of different Imams. I expected Muslim traditions to be the same.” (Fieldnotes March 25th 2008)

In this excerpt the teacher tells us how she assumed that all the Muslim (Somali) students in her class would have similar wedding or funeral traditions. Religion (Islam) and ethnicity (Somali) are markers that have made the teacher assume consistency among the students. Islam is considered as a monolithic tradition and the Somali-born Muslims as a homogenous group who share similar

celebrations. Similar assumptions also appeared elsewhere in the data: another staff member told us how he assumed that all “multicultural students” (meaning Muslim immigrants in his case) would share a similar worldview. He was also very surprised by the disagreements among Muslim students in his class.

Social categories are increasingly considered as problematic in research (Gillespie et al., 2012). Yet in the school context, discourses and practices are based on categories and categorization. One aim of (national) education is to order unclassified differences to provide information on how they could be used in the labour market (Foucault 1995; Popkewitz 1998). From this approach categories and categorisation processes could be considered as a crucial and inherent part of schooling and the making of nation, workers and labour force.

It is important to keep in mind the contextual nature of categories. As Gillespie et al. (2012, p. 392) write “the process of categorization always stems from a social position, a historical way of seeing and particular interests”. Moreover, “the social categories we use to conceptualize groups are also changing” and “all human groups are historical and changing” (Gillespie et al. 2012, 393). This is obvious if examining the historical and geographical context where the term religion emerged: the term religion has its roots in Christian theology and the secular sociology of religion in Christian Europe (e.g. King 2009; Mignolo 2009). Using ‘religion’ for non-Christian-secular worldviews implicitly (or explicitly) assumes that similar kinds of structures, epistemologies and meanings exist outside of the West [footnote 2]. (King 2009; Andreotti et al. 2012.)

The concept of religion also has a very particular connection to the modern nation state that is closely linked to Christian-secular epistemology (e.g., for discussion of Christianity and secularity and the citizen-subject see Spivak 1999; Popkewitz 2008; Mignolo 2009; and for discussions of modernity and the modern nation state as colonial projects see Santos 2007; Mignolo 2009). Nandy (2002, 62) differentiates religion as a plural tradition (religion-as-faith) from religion as monolithic political tool (religion-as-ideology). His differentiation associates faith with “a way of life, a tradition that is definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural”, while religion-as-ideology is defined as:

a sub-national, national or cross-national identifier of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious, usually political or socioeconomic, interests. Such religion-as-ideologies usually get identified with one or more texts, which, rather than the ways of life of believers, then become the final identifiers of the pure forms of religions. The texts help anchor the ideologies in something seemingly concrete and delimited and, in effect, provide a set of manageable operational definitions. (Nandy 2002, p. 62.)

Religion, therefore, takes the modern notion of the institutional faith system and the nation-state as its basis and tries to explain the rest of the world through its own framework. This framework denies the particularity of the Other and the existence of different epistemologies that are not reconcilable with modern ‘Western’ thinking. One could also ask, to what extent is the religion-as-national-political-ideology adequate to explain the variety of faiths or worldviews even within the modern Western context? Can we assume that everything that may or may have existed in this context is the religion-nation-state -combination? The goal here is to use the answers to these questions to explain how some histories and notions of the self are denied within the modern Western context. We question whether social categories can be used to explain people and their behaviour or if the categories themselves should be explained in the school context. As Gillespie et al. (2012, p. 399) write “[n]ot to problematize social categories, especially when they are used to explain behaviour, is to undermine human agency.”

When categories related to religion become confusing...

In the schools we visited religious categories were used to organise different activities for different groups of students. Students were divided into groups depending on the religion of their families, i.e., during religious education and so-called secular ethics lessons. “Exceptions” to the general order of schooling were made for those students who did not represent the secular Lutheran norm (Riitaoja 2013). Such exceptions meant opportunities of dropping out from the Christian-based events or from specific gym or craft activities and to opt for alternative programs during the events or alternative ways of passing the course.

The perceptions of inner-group diversity among the assumed homogenous religious minorities generated confusion and irritation among school staff. Such irritation stems from the realisation that previous categories and practices of the “main rule” and “exceptions” did not work anymore. Instead, the staff had to rethink categories and practices regarding the minority groups and their values. A teacher described how she familiarises herself with every group of 1st graders in order to determine her role with “immigrant students” (meaning, in her context, black Muslim students):

...one thing that is challenging-- a few years ago with the immigrant first-graders, parents were different from the immigrant parents of first-graders this year. (Sigh) Every time you start from scratch with a

new group of students you must carefully familiarize yourself with the [immigrant] families and their principles. And when you find these things out during the first year... the second grade is much easier... Although they have the same religion, when they come from different countries, they have very different practices and levels of tolerance... ("Sharon", 2009)

Starting over with a new group of students and with new categories was challenging for Sharon. The teacher could not consider her students as part of previously identified groups. Instead, she had to create new rules and practices for every new student and family "different" (deviant) from the norm. The instability of categories also meant that staff faced unanticipated changes to the school activities. The following excerpt from the fieldnotes serves as an illustration:

It's recess; I am in the teachers' room. A teacher says the Muslim students in a class will not participate in dancing (refers to school disco before May day). "So you have to keep figuring out something else." A school assistant adds that another [Muslim] student in another class could not participate in craft activities related to Easter. The assistant says students coming from Iran, instead, can participate. There is variation among the [Muslim] families. "That [Iranian] student participates in everything and is the best [the most skilful student]", she says.

Teacher: Is it so that if you are a true believer you cannot participate?

The teacher tells about a Jehovah's Witness student that was in her class. "S/he did not participate in a birthday party [in the class] but the candies were ok."

The staff discuss Christmas biscuits, whether you can bake them in the school or not. (Fieldnotes, March 20th 2009)

This episode is representative of a situation where the school staff tried to grasp different convictions and rules of behaving from the viewpoint of students and their families. They tried to create some kind of logic of categorisation that would make the differences among families of the "same" group understandable and the "illogical" rules of the families reasonable. The situation is confusing for the staff: on one hand, the convictions appear not to be negotiable, but on the other they may be flexible in certain (unexpected) situations. The aforementioned staff member considers active participation and skills of the Iranian [Muslim] student confusing. In the case of the Jehovah's Witness student, her/his decision not to participate in birthday celebrations but her/his willingness to eat the birthday candies seems illogical from the teacher's point of view. The (ir)rationality of the student's behaviour is justified by the logic of the teacher and not by the logic of the student's family and their value system.

Conclusion

In this article we have discussed the conditions of interreligious dialogue in the Finnish context. Our data and analysis suggest that the Other was constructed against the white, middle class and secular-Lutheran normal subject of schooling.

Based on these findings, one can ask whether the aims to foster interreligious (but also at the same time intercultural) dialogue in the school context are credible. The following questions then become essential: Who is going to learn about whom, and whose knowledge is to be learnt? Does the Other have an opportunity to be seen and heard as a subject or relegated to a subaltern position? Are knowledge and understanding about her constructed *with* her and in her own terms? Will a religious 'subaltern' ever be equal to the majority in (Finnish) schools?

Arthur (2011: 76) notes that the "religious dimension of dialogue for the Council (of Europe) is effectively a political mechanism and response to any perceived Islamic threats to Western democratic laws and European stability". Even more "[t]he Council believes that the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue can only be approached from the standpoint of shared values of democratic humanism" that are "largely secular constructions". Therefore, "the European Council's aim of intercultural dialogue can be seen as the neutralization of difference that means erosion of the particularity that distinguishes one religion from other". (Arthur 2011, p. 76, see also Riitaoja et al. 2010; Poulter 2013; Riitaoja 2013.)

The aims of togetherness, dialogue, and understanding may thus become tools for domesticating and mainstreaming the minority students as secular liberal citizens. Togetherness and dialogue could be, first of all, seen as ways to nurture the common secular public space that is a key structure of the modern liberal secular state (Fraser 1995). The aim of such space is to keep the citizens under surveillance, maintain cohesion and prevent fragmentation and open confrontations (Foucault 1991, 1995; Fraser 1995; Hodgson 2011; Hoskins and Sallah 2011; Ahmed 2012).

Without careful deconstruction the discussion on religions and religious groups in schools could contribute to preserve the division between the 'religious' as subjective and positional and the 'secular' as objective and neutral. Behind these categories lie individuals and thus asymmetries between them. We see the term religion as somehow problematic and suggest that the term worldview (in its ontological, epistemological and ethical meaning) emphasises the idea that positionality, particularity and partiality are elements related to every worldview. Although the term 'worldview' does not go without problems either (e.g. the possibility of conceptual ambiguity), it still enables different

discursive and social spaces and construction of alternative positions. Better than ‘religion’ ‘worldview’ would stress the fact that every person positions herself, and not just the Other, in the inescapable interrelatedness of self and other when discussing identity.

Footnotes

[1] Butler (1993) and Youdell (2003) talk about subjectivities. For the purposes of this article we talk about positions and identities.

[2] The West here refers to an epistemological and geographical space of Modernity (see Santos 2007).

[3] King (2009) talks about “border control” on the edge of secular public space. If the Other wants to be heard as a subject in this space she needs to give away her particularity on the border and become a secular subject. If she wants to keep her particularity she may enter only as an Other.

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